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The

Intellectual Virtues

BY
JAMES BONAR, M.A., LL.D.

308
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Box 345

London
MACMILLAN AND CO.
AND NEW YORK
1894

From the Author.

The
Intellectual Virtues

BY
JAMES BONAR, M.A., LL.D.

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PREFACE

A LECTURE, delivered on Wednesday, 28th June 1893, at Essex Hall, Strand, to the United Philosophical Societies of University Extension Students in West London, is here, with a few verbal alterations, printed as it was delivered.

J. B.

HAMPSTEAD, LONDON,
January 1894.

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THE INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES

SHOULD we include among moral virtues the group sometimes called Intellectual, such as prudence, penetration, discernment, discretion? Are these to be called moral virtues? The question was raised by David Hume in his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. The chapter which specially treats of the subject is significantly headed "Of some Verbal Disputes." He there says that in his *Enquiry* he has avoided the terms virtue and vice wherever there is a doubt whether the qualities praised or blamed are not to be called in English talents and defects, rather than virtues and vices. He himself counts it impossible to fix the boundaries exactly between virtues and talents. If (a) only *voluntary* qualities are to be called virtues, what of courage and self-command? If only (b) the *social*, are not these called specifically social virtues, which implies that there are virtues which are not social? If only (c) the qualities that lead to action, do not prudence and penetration lead to action? If only (d) the qualities of the *heart* as distinguished from the *head*, are not

industry, frugality, and perseverance virtues, and yet they have little to do with the heart? And, by way of a *reductio ad absurdum*, he asks, "Who did ever say, except by way of irony, that such a one was a man of great virtue, but an egregious blockhead?"

To judge by a man's own view of them in himself (Hume goes on) the two kinds of qualities are quite on a par. We regret our foolish acts quite as much as our violations of duty; and, though for my own happiness it would be better for me to have a friendly, humane heart, than to have all the other virtues of Demosthenes and Philip united, yet "I would rather pass with the world for one endowed with extensive genius and intrepid courage." A man's reputation depends as much on his sense and judgment, his gifts and his understanding, as on any other part of his character. In short, a man esteems himself and is esteemed by others as much for his *talents* as for his *virtues*. Hume thinks that this was the view expressed by the ancients, and (when they are off their guard) by the moderns too. The modern attempt to fix an absolute distinction is in Hume's opinion due to the influence of theology. In ancient times ethics and philosophy went together; but now theology, that will endure no rival and no compromise, has interfered with ethics, has straitly confined virtue to what is voluntary, and has expected philosophy to do the same. Such is Hume's case; and we have now to consider if there is any truth in it.

Now it is a fact that the ancients at first did not separate the two groups of qualities. The ideal Wise Man was the ideal Good Man. He is so in the Book of Proverbs and in the stories of the Seven Sages of early Greece. Even in Socrates, and in the Socratic parts of Plato, virtue is knowledge. Though Plato draws a distinction between the cleverness of the Sophists and real scientific knowledge, still, in his view, knowledge and goodness go together; the combination of a really scientific spirit with moral error is not thought possible. If a man knows virtue he will follow it. The four cardinal virtues—Wisdom, Courage, Temperance, and Justice—have all in this way an intellectual element.

But it is singular that, if the right course was to blend the two groups of "virtues," the tendency of Greek thought as shown in Plato's successor Aristotle was to divide them.¹ Aristotle expressly distinguishes Wisdom from scientific or philosophical knowledge. He makes a separate group out of what he calls the intellectual virtues. Just as Aristotle came a step nearer than Plato to our notion of free will, so he came nearer to a definite distinction between the praiseworthy qualities that are ethical and those that are not. What is ethical is what can be trained by habit. "When we are speaking of *character*," he says, "we do not call a man clever or shrewd, but gentle or temperate; yet cleverness is a mental quality, and every

¹ The Stoics and others reverted no doubt to the earlier view.

mental quality, if it deserves praise, may be called a virtue" (Ethics, I. end). We see how Hume got his point. The word translated virtue was undoubtedly used by Greek writers for any admirable quality, any excellence whatever. Yet now in modern language, virtue, if not otherwise defined either by context or expressly by adjective, means a moral excellence. Hume wants us to make the English word virtue bear the same ambiguity as the Greek word which it has usually translated. He seems anxious that the intellectual virtues should be recognised as in a sense ethical.

For a commentary on this view I should like to quote two writers of our own generation. Professor T. H. Green seems in one passage of his *Prolegomena* to go as far as Hume. "What is to be said, it may be asked, of those activities, those developed faculties, in the pursuit of knowledge, and in the practice of art, which we undoubtedly value and admire, *and which the ancient philosophers for that reason rightly reckoned virtues*, but which would not commonly be thought to have anything to do with such devotion of character and life to a perfecting of man as is here made out to be at once the essence and the end of virtue?" There seems a doubt (he adds) whether moral virtues and intellectual excellences can be held to relate to one common good; and he promises a discussion of this question, leaving, unfortunately, the promise unfulfilled.¹ It is true that on his own theory² the

¹ *Proleg.* III. V. p. 312.

² *Proleg.* IV. IV. 414 sq.

development of the artistic and scientific faculties was a necessary constituent in the chief end of man, but "only in so far as it was a constituent in a whole of social life." That is to say, the cultivation of talents is only moral when it is consciously social. The intellectual element is thus, as it were, kept in subordination.

Professor Sidgwick, in his chapter (iii. of Book III. of *Methods of Ethics*) on the "Intellectual Virtues" discusses chiefly the moral nature of practical Wisdom. If Wisdom (he says) means only the discernment of the best *means* to human ends, it is no more moral in itself than any other kind of acquired skill or instinctive tact. The ends might be bad; and "we should not call the most accomplished swindler wise" (*Additions*, p. 82). Does it then include the "right apprehension of *ends* as well as means?" But, according to Sidgwick, there are many ends, and many "methods of Ethics," and common-sense does not clearly tell us how the harmony of them all is attained by the man whom it calls "wise." In any case, whether it relates to ends or means, it is not more voluntary (and virtue is essentially voluntary) than the knowledge of any other kind of truth. Common-sense, too, does not treat as really wise the man who chooses either right ends or right means *without acting on them*. There is conceived to be a quality, which may be called Firmness, inseparable from wisdom. But Firmness itself is hardly

voluntary; it can be *affected* by our resolutions, but not created by an act of will. So there are other qualities conceived to belong to wisdom—sagacity, acuteness, ingenuity, caution; and none of these are strictly speaking voluntary.

It is curious that after this discussion of the subject Prof. Sidgwick not only retains practical wisdom among the virtues, but represents it as including all the rest (III. IV. §1, beg.), and involving a right direction of will as well as an intellectual mastery of the situation.

Now these quotations are not made from mere love of dialectic, or from desire to create casuistical difficulties. I believe that up to a certain point in the psychology of ethics there would be agreement among all the authorities, while beyond that point we come into the necessary doubts and problems of our own day, which ought not to frighten us even if we cannot overcome them at present.

It is true that "great virtue" cannot exist in an "egregious blockhead," if the latter is so inane as to be beyond the pale of rational animals. A moral being must be a rational being. There is, therefore, an intellectual element in all moral action; and so far all virtues are intellectual.

But it does not follow that whatever is intellectual is virtuous, or even that whatever is good of its kind, or good for a given end, is morally good. It is not every kind of rightness or perfection that is morally

good. The talents described by Hume, and even the Wisdom by Sidgwick, are from an ethical point of view raw materials of moral goodness rather than goodness itself. There was an old saying put in the mouth of the Spartans, and supposed to be addressed by the elder generation to the younger: "Spartam nactus es; hanc exorna"—"You are a Spartan; do Sparta credit." In a sense, no doubt, a born Spartan would be envied and admired by the less fortunate world, say of Boeotians and Messenians. But it is only in satire that we are told that it is to a man's credit to have been born a Spartan, or an Englishman. And the case is the same when we are considering not differences of race, but differences of natural ability. A man did not make his faculties, and has no right to be proud of them.

Yes, it may be said, but, if the man makes the best of his talents when they happen to be strong, is not the result more admirable than if he made the best of them when they were feeble? The answer is that the result is certainly more admirable, as a wheat crop of forty bushels per acre is more admirable than a crop of five and twenty. But the question before us is whether a rich talent richly developed is therefore a *moral* virtue; and the mere fruitfulness of it is no proof that it is so.

It will be replied: But, though the existence of the *faculty* is neither moral nor immoral, surely the actual *maturing* of it contains something of moral virtue. It involves an effort of will; that is to say,

the man puts himself into it and develops his faculty. Have there not been moral philosophers who have identified morality itself with the development of the faculties?

In answer to this fresh defence I would say, that even the presence of an effort of will does not prove the point, though it undoubtedly brings the case within the *region* of morality. The position of a man who has inherited a prosperous business, with large opportunities for gain in trade or manufacture, seems to be analogous. Such a lucky man of business, if he improves his advantages (advantages not created by himself), may increase his fortune, and leave his heir in a still better position. Are his industry and patience and vigilance moral virtues? Does it not depend entirely on other considerations than themselves whether they are so or not? For example, on the ends for which he works, and the motives he has at heart, as well as the means he uses, and the use to which he puts his gains? Advantages of fortune, advantages of talents, and advantages of physical health, can all be improved by exercise; and the improvement of them involves an effort of will, which makes them morally good or bad (or rather, which is itself good or bad) according to the spirit which animates the willing mind. Also, the improvement of all these advantages is desirable, because it is so much easier to do your duty when you are well in body, and clear in head, and not depressed with

poverty. But the keeping of health and wealth, and the exercise of talents, are not necessarily moral virtues; and certainly the health and wealth and talents by themselves are nothing of the sort. A man may be healthy, wealthy, and clever, and yet a profligate or a mean fellow.

We come now a step nearer to the real crux, and we may look at it in the light of a remark addressed to David Hume himself by Diderot. Diderot wrote to Hume (see *Letters of Eminent Persons to David Hume*, ed. Burton, 1849, p. 281), "You are not only a good writer, but a good man, and you know that at night, when a man retires into himself, and holds converse with his own thoughts, he is more pleased with having done a good action than written a fine page." Yet, on Hume's principles, to have written a fine page would itself have been an action morally good.

Now here is my difficulty. If the moral ideal were the development of the faculties, would not the fine page have ranked along with the good action, or been itself such? If we take Perfection as the chief end of man, have we not the same difficulty as the Utilitarians in forcing our End to include more than the concern of the Individual Self? (*Cf. Prolegomena*, p. 290).

Professor Green (*loc. cit.*), when considering a similar question, says that such a virtue as that of Temperance has a much wider range in modern times

than in ancient, because the greater part of the objects or ends by which self-denial is elicited now did not exist in Greek society. Plato and Aristotle do not allow that it may be a virtue to renounce the pleasures of gratified ambition and love of learning, or even those of hearing, sight, and smell. But (he goes on) one of the most admired types of virtue nowadays is devotion to a good which involves the renunciation even of these refined enjoyments. "There are men, we know, who with the keenest sensibility to such pleasures as those of gratified ambition and love of learning, yet deliberately forego them, who shut themselves out from an abundance of æsthetic enjoyments which would be open to them, as well as from those of family life," and who do this in order to meet the claims made upon them by the work of realising the possibilities of the human soul in society. Such sacrifices, says Green, are made *now*, and were not made *then*. Not that men are more ready now to fulfil recognised duties than they were then; but the structure of society is altered, and men are alive to claims to which they could not have been alive then.

We might, of course, add that not only is the range of duty wider, but even within the old range it is really more exacting. The notion that a man is responsible for the full use of his opportunities for well-doing, and even for culture in the Greek sense, is even clearer now. If it is the duty of society to

see that its members have such opportunities, it is the duty of the members to use them. This is perhaps the truth that lies in the strong statement attributed to a great university teacher, that "a mistake in scholarship is a *moral* error." In the same sense it is the moral duty of an author to be as accurate as possible in his references.

We might also add that philanthropic devotion was not unknown in the world outside of Greece in Plato's days; and, if no blame attaches to the Greek philosophers for not seeing so far as the Buddhist missionaries, are we free to blame those of our own day who have a like "invincible ignorance"? Or is there speculatively any moral doctrine corresponding to the Church doctrine of invincible ignorance? Is blame to be attached simply because (if a man had used his opportunities) we think he would have seen as we do, how exceeding broad is the moral commandment?

We should then come face to face with the difficulty of finding out how far in any individual case the obstacles to clear vision were or were not insuperable. There is no way of reaching the *penetralia*, the secret places of a man's heart and mind, to tell this about him. Yet the inward obstacles are the hardest. Moreover, our own views about the vast wideness of duty are themselves, it might be argued, intellectual conclusions, and reach only a high probability. Probability, however, is the guide of life; we can

take the highest probability as the guide of our own lives ; and we, therefore, find the highest moral truth in the modern notion of virtue, where there is a social element, much wider than was present in the Greek notion of it, extending, as it now does, equally to all men. I might add to that the notion of a duty owed to all living beings ; and then the government of the whole world of living beings would be brought under the responsibility of every man who tried to be morally good ; every man as a moral being would feel in some measure responsible for the government of the world of living things.

Professor Green goes with most people in supposing that the best way of furthering the good of the whole body of men (to say nothing as yet of the other living beings) is for each to take some active part in the deliberate helping of his fellow-men. "The Christian citizen sees a multitude of persons" (p. 291) around him "who, in undeveloped possibility, and in the claims which arise out of that possibility, are all that he himself is. Seeing this he finds a necessity laid upon him. It is no time to enjoy the pleasures of eye and ear, of search for knowledge, of friendly intercourse, of applauded speech or writing, while the mass of men, whom we call our brethren, and whom we declare to be meant with us for eternal destinies, are left without the chance, which only the help of others can gain for them, of making themselves in act what in possibility we believe them to

be." In other words, as things now are it is a moral duty to give up self-development except in the direction of philanthropic effort.

An objection at once occurs to this proceeding, on the part (Professor Green says) of the hedonist, but it really might proceed from one of his own followers. The objection is : Can there be real virtue in the renunciation of what is confessedly a good in itself? (293-4.) Green's answer is that the life of self-denial is valuable, not for its negative, but for its positive elements, not as a renunciation of anything, but as a *devotion* to a supreme good ; it is itself a new realisation of the spirit of man. Like the other forms of true goodness, it is not independent of the man himself ; it is a state of his spirit, and, being spiritual, it is secured by one man, not at the expense of another man, but with the common and growing benefit of all. Spiritual gains involve no man's loss, the diminution of no man's store. Men are on this field not rivals, but fellow-workers.

There is still room for criticism. In a sense, no doubt, the self-development of one man does not hinder that of another ; the internal process in one does not hinder the internal process in another. My thinking does not hinder your thinking ; it may help yours, and yours mine. My learning of a language does not hinder you from learning it. But indirectly it may be impossible for both of us to use the same external aids ; it may be the case that if one has them

the other is left without them. If the development of the intellectual virtues (described by Green in the passage first quoted) did not in this indirect way interfere with the same development of *other people's* capacities, there would be no renunciation needed on the part of the saint and apostle, St. Francis, Howard, Moffat. It is felt to be otherwise in reality. If I stay at home and develop my faculties, many other people must have theirs left undeveloped. So the matter appears to those in whom the fire of a missionary spirit has begun to burn; they deliberately choose to content themselves with a smaller actual development of their intellectual virtues than they know to be possible, and they labour to secure to others a greater actual development than these others themselves know to be possible. The devoted philanthropist far oftener *gives away* his own joys to others than *shares* them with others. He usually behaves as if duty for him was not self-development in the wide sense (as the "deploying" of *all* his faculties), but only in such a sense as involves devotion to others at the sacrifice of the intellectual, to say nothing of the grosser pleasures. Is there not a contradiction here? If the chief end is self-development, can the missionary hero be said to attain it?

Practically in general ethical teaching this missionary heroism is not pressed on men as an absolute duty. Men who are of heroic stuff, and men who are not, receive separate treatment. The latter, like the

laity in the Middle Ages, are allowed to seek their general development, and devotion to others is kept subordinate. These are simply good neighbours and honest citizens. The former are allowed to practise devotion to others while they keep the self-development very subordinate indeed. And a ground for this distinction might be found in the maxim, "Unto every one his work." Those should specially develop the faculty of self-devotion who happen to possess it in finest quality, so that its development would be really their best work.

This view might be supported by the analogy of Kant's dictum. If we act in such a way that we can think the principle of our action to be made a universal law, or a law of nature, then according to Kant we are acting rightly. Now we might reasonably add that, besides the principle, the outward action itself should be such that we can conceive it universally practised not only without the collapse of society, but with a great strengthening of social bonds and perfecting of society. This can be affirmed of the principle "Unto every one his work," and of the course of action that proceeds therefrom. Indeed, if not true of that principle and that action it is true of nothing.

We might illustrate this view further by applying it to the Wealth of society. Each of us, probably, has some notion of the sort of income and sum total of external advantages which he would desire for all men.

There is a certain degree of wealth which we should consider an almost necessary condition of really efficient service or really valuable life for all men, "almost necessary for all men" meaning absolutely necessary for the average man. It would be such as to secure health of body and mind, and opportunities for education. It is such a group of external advantages as we can conceive to be made universal not only without injury to society, but with great benefit to it. But would this hope, this abstract possibility, justify a man in resting content because he for his part possessed exactly the minimum amount of external advantages he conceived to be desirable for all? Is he to do now as he conceives all would do then—develop his own faculties as if this were the supreme law of duty?

Mr. Green evidently thinks (see *Proleg.*) that this time of fit comfort for all will never fully come. Indeed there is no sign of its near approach. The contrast of conditions of life is still with us; and we all of us feel a respect for heroic philanthropists who try to remove it, a respect greater than for savants and for geniuses.

But is it reasonable that this should be so? It might be contended that the philanthropic gift and faculty are no more of a man's own making than the intellectual virtues. He is born with them. So far as he has put himself freely and faithfully into them as his best work in life, he has done no more than his neighbour who has put himself into his

intellectual work freely and faithfully, as *his* best work; and it might seem that the one is no more praiseworthy morally speaking than the other. When a man has thus done all that is possible, he is still in a true sense an unprofitable servant; he has not developed all his faculties, but only his best faculty. But this is so whether he has been a philosopher or a philanthropist.

Frankly, the mere existence of many capacities does not seem to be a sign that duty lies in the development of them all; the whole construction of human societies points rather towards the special work as the way of duty. Mr. Green himself allows that a certain special value attaches to self-devotion, which is one particular kind of special work. Limitation of the field of labour seems to be not only the law of efficient and successful science and art, but the law of duty itself. But, if it is so, must we not say that full self-development is impracticable, and therefore not recommended by the law of duty?

It might further be said that, even if we take this alternative (unto every one his special work) as not excluding the other maxim of general self-development, but as sanctioning *both* self-culture and self-devotion, we do not get from it a criterion in detail of the *limits* between the two, or generally between the special work and the general improvement of the whole man. How far is the one to prevent or to limit the other? May I spend *all* my time over my books or in my

laboratory—if it is granted that I need not spend *all* my goods to feed the poor? If I may not so absorb myself in my special work, what amount of time and effort am I to devote to others, whether teaching them or binding up their wounds mental and physical? I think the rule, “Unto every one his work,” helps us farthest here; and, like all moral rules, it is to be interpreted by the individual on his own responsibility. There is no discharge from that war, the war within the individual of conflicting aims and claims. He will always have an element of struggle or self-denial in the very necessity of limiting himself chiefly to his best faculty. It must be left to him to so develop that, that it may least hinder the development of his other powers, while it still remains the chief end. What we should want from this point of view would be the maintenance of all the other faculties to such a pitch, and such only, that they would not hinder but help the main end. This does not seem plain, simple, and easy, but life itself is not so.

Let me try to sum up the discussion so far as I have carried it.

1. Hume would have us attach the same kind of moral value to the “virtue” of penetration or good-sense as to the virtue of temperance or justice. He would revive the identification of the two kinds that occurs in old Greek philosophy.

2. The truth in this view seems to be that there is an intellectual element in all moral virtue as well

as in all talents, but only in the sense in which every quality distinctively human is to some extent rational.

But, 3, common language, as well as modern philosophy, has rightly distinguished the two. Talents are rather the elements or materials of virtue than virtue itself. A virtue (“as is said in the *Ethics*”) is a settled tendency of will or character, leading a man to *will* certain ends, and in consequence certain means, and itself usually resulting from his having willed them often. But talents are not a matter of his own willing; they are part of himself, as he has found himself placed in the world. They are affected and directed by his action; they are not his action itself, or the controlling spirit of it. Whereas there is no virtue except in the said action and its controlling spirit.

4. We come to the difficult question, What is the controlling spirit to be—what is the end to be? If we take it to be the development of the faculties, does that mean the faculties of the man himself, or does it include those of his neighbours?

5. It may be answered, that among the faculties now seen to claim development there is that of humanity and care of others, which has a supreme claim. Humanity in the old days meant polite learning; in our days it means regard for other men, and sympathy with them, as of like mould with ourselves. This claim of humanity may be certainly

allowed a place among other claims; but is it to be paramount? In other words—

6. We have to clear up our ideas about its relation to the claims of all the other human capacities. Can there be virtue in renouncing all but one?

7. The answer, that the two are quite compatible because one man's spiritual gains are no other man's loss, is not strictly founded on fact. The renunciation of a philanthropist is not avoidable; it is a necessity laid upon him; if he were to cultivate his other faculties other men would not have the opportunity to cultivate theirs. As things are at present, simple *sharing* is not enough; there must be actual *giving away*.

8. So here appears a contradiction: If the chief end is the development of all, he who develops only one, even if it be the noblest, has not reached the chief end. Moreover, this development of only one could not be conceived as a universal law for all men, except under the view that duty is not really the development of all the faculties, but only of the best.

9. The best in this light would not appear to be in every case the one that seems to many in our day to be the best, the devotion to others. On the principle, "Unto every one his special work," it would not be that devotion except in the few cases where the faculty of helping others (which is *partly* talent) was strong in a man and felt to be his strongest power. And the virtue would not be in having

the philanthropic talent, but in doing the philanthropic work because the best work open to the individual concerned, while in another case the best work might be the work of a Grammarian or Mathematician.

10. The course of human life and thought seems to point to this, and not to general development of all the faculties, as the ripe notion of duty; and yet the existence of the other faculties may be regarded as the proper foundation of a claim on their behalf, that the development of the special faculty and the doing of the main work of a man's life shall not be so carried out as to extinguish all the rest, but rather so as to bring them into the field as allies of the one great power. There is a presumption that the full development of a man's special power, which is always individual, will not be thoroughly effective unless it involves the drawing out of the others to help it,—the others being kept in subordination, no doubt, but never in entire obscurity and effacement.

It may seem a vain task to dwell on such ideals while so large a number of men in our world are hindered by social, political, or economical obstacles from having power to show what is in them at all. But it is well to know the point upon which we mean to march, and which we believe will be one day reached.

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